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ABSTRACT

This article traces the development and rationale of the School Improvement Program proposed by the new Labor Government of Victoria (Australia). The program would be based on school communities, each voluntarily developing a long-term project improving the school as an educational entity. The design assumptions, funding criteria, and implications for educational administrators at state, regional, and school levels are clarified. The fundamental ideological commitment appears to be the democratization of school governance, management, and development. Success in the new game is characterized as adaptation to a changed ideological milieu, intensive political role-learning, accommodation of interests, and the need to create personal power bases. (Author/MLF)

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THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM IN VICTORIA,

OR, HOW TO PLAY THE NEW GAME

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Abstract

This article traces the development and rationale of the School Improvement Program proposed by the new Labor Government of Victoria, Australia. The design assumptions, the funding criteria, and implications for educational administrators at state, regional and school levels are clarified. Success in the new game is characterized as adaptation to a changed ideological milieu, intensive political role-learning, the accommodation of interests, and the need to create personal power bases.

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INTRODUCTION

Three recent events have sharpened the interest of educational administrators in Victoria concerned with the development of schools. The newly elected Labor government pledged $2 million dollars for a "School Improvement Program". Secondly, Mrs Joan Kirner took her seat in the Upper House and was asked by the Minister of Education to convene a Working Party to plan the development of the program for 1983. Thirdly, Mr Ken McKinnon has recently been appointed Chairman of the new State Board of Education.

To understand the nature of such a program, and to anticipate what it might mean for school-based administrators and external consultants, it is necessary to examine a School's Commission proposal[1] that failed[2] to attract funding, and then to consider how events are intended to unfold in Victoria.

THE PROGRAMS DESIGN

While the nature of the Victorian program is regarded as emergent at this time, the close involvement of Mrs Joan Kirner suggests that the rationale, approaches and intended dynamics could reflect design features explicit in the earlier proposal. The discussion now draws heavily on that original statement.

The fundamental design[3] began with three assumptions about expectations of schools. Firstly, that schools were expected to be transmitters of culture, developers of a competent workforce, a means of individual fulfilment, and to act as an intrument of social equity. Secondly, schools were held to be falling short of the high expectations held in the

community to do with the performance and the role of schools. Thirdly, many schools were considered to be lagging or lacking in their capacity to adjust to the ever more complex needs of students. While administrators might today contest some of these assumptions, a series of national and state studies[4] adds considerable weight to the line of argument adopted in the Triennium Report.

From these three assumptions, and a recognition that education budgets might not expand in real terms in the future, the argument then proceeded to consider it necessary for school personnel (with parents) to produce the many practical adaptations required. Resource provision was recognized as important, but the processes of galvanising each school into developmental action was held to be the prime focus of concern. Thus the rationale concluded that the program would be based on school communities, each voluntarily developing a long-term project improving the school as an educational entity. One implication the writer draws is that this program was to facilitate a move from traditional system and school-based curriculum development, into community-school development. The question then arises, what approaches were assumed to facilitate such a move?

The original proposal stressed the need for schools to create an in-built capacity for self examination and adaptation, in other words, to institutionalize self-renewal procedures. Central to procedural developments were to be ways-and-means for a school's community to be involved in the formative evaluation of its school's performance and school organization (with respect to the satisfaction of student needs). In other words, the clients were to help in appraisal, planning and implementation phases of change. Processes suggested included school-focussed inservice education and training (INSET) for professional and lay people, the development of community education centres, community-school-based curriculum development, the planned restructuring of schools,

provisions for the handicapped and disadvantaged, integration of immigrants into multi-cultural settings, and so on. One crucial implication to the writer was the nature of consultants required to facilitate such collaborative planning. Process consultants[5] would need to be selected and contracted by schools on their attributed credibility and expertise, with internal facilitation obviously preferable in the longer term. It therefore implied formal leaders learning, as soon as possible, an extensive range of processes by which they could encourage equity of participation in school decision-making. Presuming that educational administrators will wish to facilitate equitable participation, what dynamics then are crucial to such a form of proposal development?

Particular capacities were presumed in the design to be present (or capable of development) among teachers, parents, administrators and lay leaders. In particular, the skills of critical appraisal, planning and implementing innovations were considered important, as were the commitment and techniques required for collaborative action research. The design also presumed process consultants could be available to (a) facilitate proposal development, (b) assist with implementation phases, and (c) sustain evaluative functions.

Another dynamic suggested was the overt encouragement by system leaders for schools to undertake reviews of practices and organization, and for systems to promote staff stability. School leaders were urged to organize 'operating space' for staff to be involved in planning events, and to consider management and resources as flexible factors in project development.

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This is not to infer that only whole-school actions were envisaged. Recognized was the possibility for individual and small group initiatives that complemented a school's general improvement strategy. Further,

information networks between schools were held to be of value to facilitate collaboration, and for the sharing of ideas-that-work. Other implications included the proactive use of lead time to form the program's administrative and planning services, and for INSET of process consultants to enhance their skills and credibility as external change facilitators.

The fundamental ideological commitment appeared to be the democratization of school governance, management and development. Interest groups that have traditionally held these functions to be their exclusive domain will probably find this implication difficult to accept. Therefore, how was the program to be managed?

The proposal in the Triennium report recognized that the needs of schools varied, as did the capacities and ingenuity of their communities. Therefore any well-thought-out initiative which indicated a potential for substantial school improvement (that was developed by the school-community or enjoyed its full support) would be eligible for consideration for funding. At that time it was also indicated that priority would be given to projects associated with the schooling of 15 and 16 year olds, and that schools already participating in the Disadvantaged Schools Program[6] could not apply.

A startling implication for administrators in government and catholic state systems was that such a program would complement (even subsume) other programs sustained by other budget sources. Services to schools could thus be hampered by boundary disputes unless administrative rationalization was conducted at state and regional level. This is the concern of the next section which clarifies the proposed organization, and in particular the budgetary levels and processes envisaged.

THE PROGRAM ORGANIZATION

The original proposal sought to incorporate the successful features of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, and to subsume funding from School-Level Innovations and School-Level Evaluation programs, and some funds from the Services and Development Program. There were no sub-allocations earmarked to cover specific elements (e.g. evaluation, INSET etc.), and it was held that elements could be either components of a total school improvement strategy or separate projects in their own right.

The program-mounting tasks at that time were implied to be needs surveying, the establishment and incorporation of features that were adjudged causes of success in the other programs to be subsumed, but above all (and the most bureaucratically problematic) the dismantling and subsuming of established programs. Nevertheless the proposal forsaw administration structures and functions emerging with the following pattern:

a. At the national level, a School Improvement Commiteee appointed to advise the Commission, with State Chairpersons to meet regularly.

b. At the State level, separate Government and Non-Government School Improvement Committees, each representative of the education authority, teachers, parents, students and the wider community. Over half these state committees were to comprise of people directly involved in schools, and they were to develop strategies to reinforce the impact of the program and to offer advice direct to schools on project development, and to collate a register of consultants with process skills held to be appropriate. In the proposal there was a total absence of any reference to roles to be played by state systems or by regional personnel, and in the writer's view, triggered bureaucratic resistance.

Instead, large-scale long-term proposals anticipated representative school improvement committees relating directly to the state level committees. Indeed, ambitious plans could have involved a grant for

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planning purposes, but funds could not be tagged as recurrent resources in the proposed scheme. It was envisaged that schools would register interest with a brief outline so that consultant tasks and planning grants could be assessed, and to allow long-term state-level budgeting. Criteria for funding were given as:

a. evidence of commitment of the school to an improvement effort,

b. overall quality of the submission,

c. the condition of the school,

d. evidence of significant collaborative effort made to examine the school situation,

e. evidence of enthusiastic support from the school's community, and

f. the school's capacity to carry the project through.

To illustrate the dimensions of grants envisaged, short term grants were defined as projects taking less than one year, and longer-term grants could range up to 3 or 4 years. Longer-term, large-scale plans in a big school could have involved a planning grant of about $5000, and successive grants of up to $30,000 per year. Improvement plans of shorter duration, or with restricted aspects of school improvement might have attracted grants of $10,000. The notional magnitudes were expected to involve about one-third of Australian schools during the triennium 1982-1984.

There are many factors which would have determined the extent of success the program could have enjoyed. Crucial would have been the facilitative consultant roles, or the personnel-rich schools would have merely accelerated their development and further exposed the poorly-led schools. Another critical factor is the extent to which systems could have managed the move from curriculum-focused advisory and supervisory services, to school and team-focused process consultancy services. However, speculations lost meaning on the 4th June 1981, when the then Federal Minister of

Education, the Hon. Wal Fife M.P., announced the government's response in a guidelines statement:[7]

> ... the Government is not prepared at this time to consider commencing any further programs. While the proposed school improvement program will not be implemented and the school level innovations program will be discontinued, the joint program for professional development will be retained at its existing level of funding.

However with the election of a Labor Government for Victoria on 3 April 1982 came the promise of a rebirth of the School Improvement Program.

VICTORIAN DEVELOPMENTS

The first move by the new state Minister of Education, Mr Robert Fordham, was to ask Joan Kirner to convene a Working Party. As the membership includes departmentally employed personnel, or representatives of teachers' unions or parents' organizations associated with the state government school system, it therefore appears that developments will exclude non-government schools.

Some of those invited to contribute at a one-day Think Tank were from wider institutions, apparently on a representative basis. One participant indicated that the preconditions that had to be assumed included:

a. consultants would facilitate participatory processes involving parents, teachers, students etc. in policy development, or, that staff would release existing staff members for this purpose,
b. there would be greater control over resources by local school communities,
c. inservice for parents and teachers would aim at describing the practices of schools, and facilitate school reviews for accountability purposes. A cycle of evaluation, policy development and change in practice was envisaged,
d. the development of a long-term (5 year) plan for the school,
e. a dissemination of information on participative processes, and

f. funding criteria would be defined by a State Board of Education, through a Standing Committee on School Improvement.

It is pertinent to note at this point that these preconditions given to the 'Think Tank' echo the assumptions and design explicit in the Triennium Report. Further, Mrs Kirner re-emphasised to the Group that the Program would stimulate reflection on the practices of the school as a whole, and added another justification - to increase the retention rates of working class children. An interesting duality was alluded to when she indicated that change programs would have to operate on the system itself, as well as in schools in the system. This appears to have been an oblique reference to existing structuring of services at central and regional level. One key question is who will employ and control consultants, and another is the extent to which regional or central priorities and consultant services relate to this program structurally. But above all, is this Program to overlay others without structural rationalization, and add to the bewildering array of budgets, committees and structures all competing to offer services or direction to state schools?

Participants were also told that residential INSET would soon follow to underpin developments, and it was intended that decision-making would be collaborative at all levels. The clear theme was about the distribution of power to school communities; a redistribution of resources to school level given considered evaluation and planning. This process was explicitly related to Mr Fordham's restructuring of the Department of Education, indicating that any school improvement program would be integrated into the services offered by that Department.

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But what did the Think Tank do? It was given the framework above, and then asked to add to exemplars of collaborative and non-collaborative schools

already prepared. Then it briefly brainstormed past barriers to collaboration in schools - which were then generalized into a short list. One barrier was examined and strategies to overcome it were collated. The workshop ended with a role play: How to Spread the Idea of School Improvement.

ANTICIPATED DEVELOPMENTS

It can be drawn from this account that the School Improvement Program for Victoria is at an intermediate stage of development and is based on the 1981 design. But to focus the thoughts of proactive administration it is apparent that bland counter-assertions like "... all you need is a tame council president and a good project writer ..." could have limited validity, if they ever did.

Plainly the Victorian School Improvement Program is to emerge as a collaboratively planned exercise. Linkages can be drawn to the Schools Commission experiences, to Victorian Labor Party policy, to the close involvement of Mr Robert Fordham and Mrs Kirner, and to a number of Departmental personnel, but central to the mounting of the exercise is the joint commitment to collaborative processes and to the implementation of a S.I.P. The widely shared understanding is that the S.I.P. will seek to provide a framework in which existing practices in schools can be examined, and changed if changes are needed, and that schools will be supported by the system whilst doing so.

It is therefore important to appreciate that a new structure is intended at all levels. A State Board of Education is being established, and Regional Boards and School Councils are foreshadowed. These bodies will be responsible for the development of educational policies, and will make decisions - rather than any individual. Whereas the "P.A. Report"[8] recommended that policy was to be a central role, management a regional task, and operations a school level concern, it is clear that Labor

educational policy favours responsibility and involvement in decision-making at all levels. Whilst the P.A. Report recommended specific operational conditions (such as that no committee make decisions - only advise an individual who would be responsible for making decisions), the emerging changes indicate collaborative processes involving individuals who represent collectivities. The writer characterizes the former approach as structural-functional in design and operationally bureaucratic in Weberian terms. The new approach is democratic and collaborative in design, and therefore will probably be intensely political in operation.

The bluntest message for principals is that they will be part of decision-making processes, and they will be expected to share their responsibility. However in all recent information there is a repeated insistence; such decision-making and policy-making processes will not impinge on the implementational role of professionals, nor exclude professionals from continuing to make a major impact on policy at all levels. Control and responsibility at all levels are intended to be shared.

THE NEW GAME

This information will raise a series of questions in educational administrators' minds. Many, of course, can indicate developments highly consistent with this form of educational ideology - from team teaching to examples of effective parental and student participation. Many administrators will welcome a program which will have as its raison d'étre these probable aims:

1. to assist schools to reflect on their total practice, and develop in ways that improve the learning experience of all students;
2. to encourage processes of systemic decision-making which provide resources and services to schools in aims that meet their identified needs, and result in the delivery of co-ordinated support services to the school;

3. to encourage and support collaborative projects between parents, students and teachers in schools, and between schools and the rest of the system;
4. to encourage and support a cyclical process of school evaluation, planning, implementation and re-evaluation.

But what will it mean for individuals, who are educational administrators? What many administrators in the Victorian Department of Education will welcome even more is the certainty of a defined role and status in the future. With the P.A. structure apparently being reviewed by the new Labor State Government, personal sense-making is typically based on the incremental analysis of positions advertised in the popular press. Thus in the short term, the administrator's milieu is to be one characterized by intense competition and uncertainty, coupled with personal meanings of betterment, survival, or coping with perceived demotion.

As the top-down restructuring proceeds (and at regional and school levels shared control and responsibility become increasingly contested), collectivities will press their cases with greater determination and sophistication. Educational administrators will have little option but to strengthen their own collectives, if they wish to have influence, let alone survive in the long term. Charismatic and positional power each can be effective in the short and medium term, but in political arenas, they soon wear thin as strategies.

In the long term, educational administrators will need to look deeper to the essentially political nature of policy-making for answers, and inwards if they wish to be sure of, and comfortable with, their fundamental purposes.

The probable aims of the S.I.P. above evoke emotion, and condense into four statements of intense democratic symbolism, promises of a richer future greatness in Victorian state education. Why is any reference to

the existing situation absent? It illustrates, in the view of the writer, that such aims are above all else designed to mobilize the attitudes of individuals. The administrator might care to consider the evocation of arousal or quiescence in mass publics as a key process, in itself yielding power.[9] Therefore, to continue to be successful in the coming circumstances of localized control and responsibility, the key determinant of an educational administrator's political success will not be educational policy adopted as political goals, but the extent and nature of his power base. Although a power base is both the medium and outcome of political initiatives, Miller[10] summarises the context of the new game thus:

> ... Politics rests ultimately upon the conflict and accommodation of interests, brought into being by the manifold inequalities of a society; broadly speaking, political decision will follow the course along which it is led by the relative strengths of interests. The changes which individuals bring about are important and effective, but they cannot run completely counter to the general social inclinations of the community in question ...

The more, ultimately it will mean constituents looking past the administrator's ways and means of winning resources, through the organizational practices organized through recurrent use of that knowledge and associated skills, and instead, evaluating the administrators' character and action in terms of their personal interests. If the result is to be intense fundamental democracy with direct local accountability, will an administrator's action reflect pre-eminent concern for the emancipatory purposes of education, or for the recursive creation of his power base? Pragmatists will immediately recognize these seeming alternatives as compatible with proactive democratic human agency. Theorists, however, will sense the interpretative inadequacy of administrative science,[11] and might instead consider a theory of legitimacy incorporating justifiable norms of practice, which are neither facts nor values.[12]

By explicitly placing educational administrators at all levels in the nexus between the political and educational sub-systems in Victoria, initiatives like the proposed S.I.P. will serve to illuminate the role of educational administration as cultural agency. Will the structuring properties of educational culture be revealed to be rituals, myths and metaphors to do with competition, social distance and suppression, or about democratic involvement, equity and emancipation?

Notes & References:

1. Schools Commission (1981) Report for the Triennium 1982 - 1984. March. p. 203 et seq. The key designers were Jean Blackburn and Ken McKinnon, both Commissioners at the time. Joan Kirner was also a Commissioner, deeply engaged in the Disadvantaged Schools Program.

2. Commonwealth Schools Commission, (1981) Triennium 1982-84, Report for 1982. August. p. 37.

3. Schools Commission (1981) ibid., p. 203.

4. See for example, Schooling for 15 and 16 Year Olds, (1980) Schools Commission, November, and Do Schools Care?, Dynan, M.P., Education Department of Western Australia, 1980.

5. Schools Commission (1981) ibid., p. 205.

6. In the Victorian State Education system, the Disadvantaged Schools Program is known as the Supplementary Grants Program.

7. See 2 above.

8. P.A. Report (1981) The Rationale and Definition of the Proposed Organization Structure. The Victorian Department of Education : P.A. Australia. September.

9. Edelman, M. (1971) Politics as Symbolic Action : Mass Arousal and Quiescence. Chicago : Markham. p. 4.

10. Miller, J.D.B. (1962) The Nature of Politics. Pelican, p. 17.

11. Bates, R.J. (1982) "Towards a Critical Practice of Educational Administration", C.C.E.A. Studies in Educational Administration, No. 27, September.

12. This is a Habermasian concept discussed in detail by Foster, W.P. (1980) "Administration and the Crisis in Legitimacy : A Review of Habermasian Thought", Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 50, No. 4, November. pp. 503-504.